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SELF-ASSESSMENT:
A Journey of Change

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Handout 1.2

Self-Awareness, Careful Observation, and Flexible Response

There are three keys to positive parent–professional relationships: self-awareness, careful observation, and flexible response.

- **“Self-awareness”** means thinking about your own beliefs and behaviors. This helps you learn to recognize when your “hot buttons” are being pressed, to notice when you have a strong reaction to a certain family or child, and to understand how your reactions influence your relationships with families.
- **“Careful observation”** means using information from your senses—what you see, hear, feel—to better understand children’s and parents’ beliefs and behaviors. At the heart of observation is recognizing that behavior has meaning. We just don’t know what the meaning is sometimes. We can use both self-awareness and careful observation to help us develop an “educated guess,” or develop an hypothesis, about the meaning of behavior.
- **“Flexible response”**—You use a flexible response to new situations when you use an “educated guess” to decide what to do. This involves thinking about the unique needs of the family and child and asking yourself: “What do I want to achieve in this situation?” There may be more than one way to respond. If your first idea does not work the way you had hoped for, you can try another way.

Handout 1.1

Parent–Professional Collaboration

When caregivers have good relationships with parents and children, it helps families and early childhood programs in several ways:

- **Parent Support of Program Goals**—Parents become more involved in the program and are more likely to work with you to help their children learn and grow. This makes your job easier!
- **Parent Participation**—A positive relationship with you as the professional can motivate parents to participate more fully in the program. Parents will feel respected and supported by you and will offer support and respect to you.
- **Parent–Child Relationship**—When you, as the professional, support and nurture parents, parents will be better able to support and nurture their children. This strengthens parent–child relationships.
- **Your Job Satisfaction**—Respect between parents and professionals helps you feel good about your work. When you feel good about your work, you do good work for your program!

Handout 1.4

The Parallel Process in Relationships

THINK ABOUT IT

A parent is rushing into the toddler room at a child care center, trying to disentangle herself from a clinging 2-year-old. The teacher comes up to the mother, touches her shoulder, and says, “Looks like you’re having one of those days.” The mother smiles, relaxes, and takes a deep breath. She leans over and gives her child a hug, taking an extra minute to say good-bye. Think how the teacher’s words and actions made it easier for the child and her mother to say good-bye that morning.

Now imagine the same scenario—the mother coming in, the child clinging, and the teacher looking up from what she’s doing but not saying a word. In this example, the mother feels frustrated and a little embarrassed and is short with her child: “You have to let go of me! Mommy is leaving for work now.” In this example, both child and parent are left with an unhappy sense of themselves and each other.

Your relationships with families help set the tone for the parent–child relationships. When parents trust you and feel comfortable with you, they know they can ask you questions, share their own hopes and worries, and learn more about themselves and their children.

Over time, this positive relationship with you helps to strengthen their responsive, nurturing relationships with their children. When what happens in one relationship has an effect on what happens in another relationship, it is called a *parallel process*.

Of course, the parallel process can also move difficult or tense feelings from one relationship to another. Stress in the professional–parent relationship can add stress to a parent–child relationship.

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We really hit it off with some parents. With other parents, it is harder to make connections. When we're in a relationship that we find challenging, our first reaction is often to think the *other* person needs to change, but in reality, the only person we can change is ourselves.

The good news is that any change that we make—in how we respond to someone, our tone of voice, the words we use, and our body language—encourages the other person to change as well. As we try out new ways of interacting with parents, the other relationships in our lives also may improve.

Handout 1.8

Asking Questions and Wondering

Asking a question is one of the easiest ways to give ourselves a moment to stop and not react. It helps us buy a little time while we think about whatever issue we're dealing with. Asking questions also gives us more information, which helps us formulate a response and gives us some insight into what the child or parent is feeling and thinking. Wondering promotes an attitude of genuine interest and curiosity, opening us up to learning from parents.

Asking questions is also important because it acknowledges that parents are the experts on their own children. By doing so, it reinforces the mutual respect in our relationship. Most importantly, asking questions changes the power dynamics of the interaction by acknowledging that the responsibility for finding a solution is shared by both parents and providers.

The people at the Portage Program in Wisconsin have a great idea for using questions in a strategic way. They suggest that when you find yourself feeling frustrated or judgmental, you turn the judgment into a question. For example:

1. That parent just doesn't care. She is always at least 20 minutes late picking up her daughter!
 - I wonder why she is always late?
 - I wonder where she works—are her job responsibilities unpredictable or is her workload too heavy right now?
 - I wonder where she is commuting from—is traffic the problem?
 - I wonder how she feels about always arriving late?

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Notice the difference in how you feel when you are asking, rather than judging.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

1. Take a few moments and think about a time when you made a judgment about a parent. Write down the judgment you made.
2. Brainstorm at least three questions that you might have asked yourself before making this judgment.
3. Brainstorm at least three questions that you might have asked the parent before making this judgment.